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ABSTRACT

Using tests that are neither reliable nor valid, school districts are currently categorizing large numbers of children as unready for entrance into kindergarten and first grade. Parents are being asked to wait a year before sending their children to public school classes or to place them in a pre-kindergarten class. Other children complete kindergarten but are retained or placed in a transition class before they can proceed to first grade. Affecting one-fourth to one-third of all children, these procedures are disturbing and unjustified, as discussions of birthdate effects on early school success, screening tests, exclusionary practices, retention and transition classes, and changes in the kindergarten curriculum over the last 20 years show. Data indicate that setting up barriers to access to educational settings does not benefit the children excluded or retained. Curriculum and entrance policies must be changed so that kindergarten can become an environment that accepts all 5-year-olds and helps them to pass on to first grade. Schools must accept diversity in all spheres of development and employ well-trained teachers who use appropriate strategies to help all children succeed in the early years of schooling. (RH)

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Two Years of Kindergarten:
Ethical and Curricular Considerations

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Abstract

Many children are facing barriers to entrance into kindergarten and first grade. Using tests that are neither reliable or valid school districts are finding some children unready and asking parents to wait a year before sending them or to place them in a prekindergarten class. Other children complete kindergarten but are retained or placed in a transition class before they can proceed to first grade. The implications of these practices are examined in light of possible discrimination of younger children and males. The effects on the curriculum are also discussed.

Two years in kindergarten? Many children who are legally ready to enter their first public school classroom are being told they are unready. Parents are told by school personnel to keep them out a year to give them "a gift of time." Or they are asked to send them to a preschool program at their own expense. A few school districts are offering prekindergarten classes. Some children who do get into kindergarten are told near the end of the year that they are not ready to do first grade work. They are asked to repeat kindergarten or go into a transition class. This means that increasing numbers of children are spending two years instead of one at the kindergarten level. What are the ethical and curricular implications of this trend and how does it affect the early school experience for young children?

Birthdate Effects

Some studies have found that the younger children in the classroom do less well than those with earlier birthdates. Langer, Kalk, and Searles (1984) found that when achievement scores for older students were compared with those of younger classmates at nine, the older children did better. This disparity decreased by age 13 for white students and disappeared for both white and black students by age 17. Younger children were retained more often than older. DiPasquale, Spillman, and Lutz (1983) found a birthdate effect for boys in early grades, but not for girls.

Spillman and Lutz (1983) reviewed research from 1934 through 1980 on age of entry to kindergarten and found no optimal age for all children to enter school. "Very young entrants may not adjust very well, but other factors besides age affect a child's

performance in school. Age criterion alone is a poor predictor of school success and should not be used independently to determine entry age." (p. 351)

Other research has lead to the conclusion that concern over birthdate at school entry is misplaced and can be discriminatory. Gredler (1980, p. 10) said, "One of the main difficulties the younger child meets in a North American school is the teacher's expectation that because he is younger and a male he automatically is going to have difficulty in school." Dietz and Wilson (1985) from the University of Northern Iowa did a study of 117 students who entered kindergarten in the 1978-79 school year. For the purposes of this study they were divided into three groups - 62, 66, or 71 months at age of entry. Kindergarten readiness test scores, standardized achievement test scores, and group ability test scores that were given to all students routinely were used as well as retention in grade as outcome measures. There were no significant differences in readiness scores or in the second or fourth grade test scores, although boys scored about six months below girls on the achievement tests. There were no significant interaction effects for age and gender. Of those retained three were from the youngest group, six from the middle group, and one from the oldest. Shephard and Smith (1985) in their study of the Boulder Valley Kindergarten program reported that entrance ages varied by about six months across the country and that there has been a national trend for raising the age. Kindergarteners are older than they used to be. Since most states only admit in the fall of the year, this means there is a year's difference between the oldest and youngest

in each kindergarten classroom. Changing the entrance age just creates a new group of youngest children. Internationally, age of school entrance varies also. Mandatory age of entrance into British Infant Schools is five whereas it is seven in Swedish schools.

The research on age at school entrance, and on the differential effects of early versus later birthdates and gender are still fairly controversial. The presumption that younger children and boys will be less successful in kindergarten is open to question.

Screening Tests

Screening tests are not accurate enough to determine who should or should not be admitted to kindergarten. Screening tests are being widely misused to diagnose children as "immature" when there is no standard criteria for what developmental maturity is. Bear and Modlin (1987, 43) said, "Immaturity, particularly in relation to school readiness, is a nebulous psychoeducational construct in desperate need of justification for its popularity of use."

What kinds of items are included in the Gesell School Readiness Screening Test, which is being widely used by school districts?

Children are expected to copy structures made from cubes, use pencil and paper to copy shapes, write numbers up to 20, complete a drawing of a man and talk about how the man feels, answer questions about their family such as "What does your Daddy do?," name animals, and tell what they like to do at home, at school, or in other settings. The makers of this test, which is intended to be administered in 20 minutes, have claimed that this test identifies accurately those children who are ready for kindergarten and screens out those who

should be given "a year to grow on," that is, wait a year before entering school.

Meisels (1987) has pointed out the problems with using the Gesell and similar screening tests. First of all, screening tests are designed only to indicate that a child might have a problem. They are not supposed to describe the nature or extent of a disability. They simply signal the need for further diagnostic testing. This would mean that when a screening test shows a child as "unready," that child would be referred to a psychologist or psychometrician for intensive follow up using tests which have acceptable psychometric properties. This rarely happens in school districts when screening for kindergarten readiness, however. Many screening tests themselves lack acceptable psychometric properties. They are not reliable. This means that no inner consistency has been established. Two different teachers could test the same child. One could find the child ready for kindergarten and the other could find the child unready even though they are using the same test on the same child. Thus, there is no interobserver reliability. The child could be tested one day and be found "ready." The same test administered to the same child two weeks later might result in a child being held back from entering kindergarten. Thus, no test-retest reliability has been determined.

The extent to which most screening tests are valid is also not known. Concurrent validity, which compares screening results with the outcome of diagnostic assessments that occur a week to ten days later, have not been done. The studies of predictive validity that have been done have shown that the Gesell School Readiness Screening

Test, the Gesell Developmental Screening Inventory, Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning, and the Comprehensive Identification Process all lack predictive validity. That means they have identified many children as unready who did well in kindergarten or they have failed to screen out many children who were unsuccessful in meeting the requirements of the kindergarten classroom. Bear and Modlin (1987) found the same problems with the Gesell Preschool Test, a 40-minute test that includes most of the items on the Gesell School Readiness Screening Test and adds testing for vocabulary, number memory, and fine and gross-motor skills. In their study the GPT, given in August before kindergarten entrance, made errors of the false positive type. One-third of the children who were promoted to first grade had been predicted to fail. The percentage of false negatives-the children who were excluded from the retained group-was a relatively low 13%.

Meisels has also pointed out that readiness tests that are designed to facilitate curriculum planning should not be used as a substitute for developmental screening tests that are designed to identify children who may need special services or intervention. They lack predictive validity also.

What many school districts have done when they have heard of the controversy over the Gesell tests has been to drop it and substitute an even-more-questionable test of their own design making no serious pretense of standardizing it or establishing reliability and validity norms.

Elkind (1987) said that when we try to assess readiness, we're not at all sure of what we want children to be ready for. If the

classroom is homogeneous and follows a strict curriculum, the skills needed to survive in that environment will be different from a kindergarten where the curriculum is more flexible. Shipman (1987), in asking what abilities children need upon entering school said, "What school, with what external and internal environmental characteristics, with what administrative and teaching personnel, with what curricula and modes of instruction, and what diversity of students?" She went on to enumerate a long list of attributes a child will need to succeed in school. Instead of narrow abilities, she cited as basic characteristics such global qualities as good health and a supportive home environment. She also enumerated a list of factors that affect the child's readiness-parent programs, affordable and available pre- and postnatal care, full employment, adequate shelter for the homeless, access to quality preschool programs, and the presence in all communities of other social service programs that would support families with young children. Osborne (1985) has shown that the teacher's experience and temperament will also create different classroom climates.

Exclusion of Children

The idea that the public schools themselves can determine who can come to them and who cannot has disturbing ethical implications. What some may see as a "gift of time" can be seen by others as a "theft of time." (Keeping children in high school when they are 19 presents other problems. Those who are older than classmates have a higher drop-out rate.) Families are counseled to keep their unready children at home or find a prekindergarten experience for them. Or they can, against all advice, send their child to kindergarten. It

is often the least able children whose parents elect to send them - usually because mothers are working and have to rely on the school for child care. This creates an even greater gap in abilities in the classroom. Where prekindergarten programs exist, they have often become dumping grounds for all children who don't fit into a homogeneous kindergarten. Not only are there children with late birthdays or those screened out as "developmentally immature," included also are non-English speaking children and children who have gross developmental lags, but for whom no appropriate special education program exists. These prekindergarten programs have a preponderance of males. Houston (1983) in examining sex bias in the schools said that teachers in elementary schools are women and they unconsciously reinforce feminine behaviors. They find boys' behavior troublesome and disturbing. Boys make-up of more than two-thirds of prekindergarten programs. There is some evidence that low-income children are also over-represented in these classrooms of those excluded from kindergarten.

Shepard and Smith (1986) have said that extra-year programs such as a prekindergarten are just about the same as two years of kindergarten even though the curriculum is altered to make the first year a preschool experience.

In a carefully designed study with a total sample of 223 children, May and Welch (1984) compared three groups of kindergartners eligible to start school. One group were traditional kindergarten entrants. A second group were children whose parents had decided to send them to kindergarten even though they had been counseled to delay entrance for another year as a result of their

Gesell scores. A third group had stayed out of kindergarten to "buy a year" because they also had low Gesell scores. Scores for all three groups on Stanford Achievement Tests(SAT) at the end of second, fourth, and sixth grades were compared. All were tested in third grade on the New York Pupil Education Program (PEP). Traditional admits scored higher than the other two groups on all tests. However, those children screened out who went to kindergarten scored higher than the "buy a year" group who didn't enter kindergarten until they were fully six. So, even though the "buy a year" group was a year older than those who went to kindergarten with low Gesell scores, they did less well on academic outcome measures up through the sixth grade. This extra year did not foster more intellectual growth and, in fact, might have had deleterious effects on these children's academic achievement.

Instead of kindergartens being a place that welcomes all children who are five and accepting that they will come from a diversity of backgrounds and need a varied and flexible curriculum, many districts have set up barriers to entrance into public schools. While this practice of screening started out as a well-intentioned desire to help children succeed in kindergartens which have become increasingly academic, it has had the effect of making kindergarten available to older five- and six-year-olds who are able to cope with a curriculum that was designed for first graders only a few years ago.

Retention or Transition Classes

Another disturbing practice is to retain children another year in kindergarten before allowing them into first grade. Whether they

repeat kindergarten or are sent to a "transition room," "developmental kindergarten," or "pre-first grade," they are given the message that they have flunked kindergarten and may not advance with their age-mates.

Donofrio (1977) saw retention as the "therapy of choice" for these he labeled Fate's Unfavored Children. That is, they were male, had late birthdates, poor verbal facility, IQ's in the 80's and 90's, and were hyperkinetic. He thought retaining them at kindergarten and first grade enabled them to be with others of their own behavioral age.

Others have found this growing trend toward retention and transition classes to be unacceptable. Norton (1983) in summarizing the research on retention has reported consistently negative results. Children do not learn more by repeating a grade in elementary school. In fact, they often learn less than those who are promoted in spite of low achievement. They regress. The idea that children gain social maturity by being retained is also not borne out by the research. A child who is retained suffers a loss of self esteem. Despite everything that parents and teachers say to ameliorate the situation, they know they have failed. This feeling is often self-perpetuating. Retention also does nothing to narrow the ability range in the classroom and produces little positive change in academic achievement of pupils at any level.

Shepard and Smith (1985) in their examination of retention in kindergarten in the Boulder Valley School District in Colorado found there were no set criteria for retention. Some teachers and schools retained children and some didn't.

Oakes (1983) found that transition room placement programs were also discriminatory. They result in grouping children by sex. Just as grouping children by race has been deemed indefensible by the courts so might be the practice of segregation by gender.

Gredler (1984) examining research just of the transition class between kindergarten and first grade found that this placement offered a watered-down version of kindergarten. Children in transition classes generally received much less reading instruction. School personnel's negative expectations probably contributed to poor educational outcomes.

Plummer, Lineberger, and Graziano (1986) in their review of the academic and social consequences of retention have also raised the equity question. Children who are retained are rejected and discriminated against by their peers. Again, boys were retained more often than girls. Statistics from several states (p. 226) showed that minority students are retained twice as often as nonminority students.

The Kindergarten Curriculum

What has happened to the kindergarten curriculum that makes it so difficult for some children to make it through in one year? There's no denying that it has become more academically oriented in the last 20 years. We have blamed everybody for this. First grade teachers want children who have already progressed through the first series of reading primers, can take pencil and paper tests, know how to write all their letters, have computer savvy, can decode almost any word, and can "sit still and be quiet."

School boards, usually representative of the elite of the community, want the kindergarten to do more to foster achievement. Textbook companies sell curricular materials to boards. Often, very little attention is given to the impact of these packaged goods on what happens in the classroom. Parents are eager that their child get a competitive edge on their agemates. Indeed, many parents make the decision not to send their children to school when they are legally eligible because they do not want to subject them to this pressure. By waiting until they are a year older, they can assure success for their child. Another reason parents often give is that they want their children to do well in sports and an added year gives their child an advantage on the playing fields. We could also blame the kindergarten teachers. Many of them are trained to teach the elementary grades and have almost no early childhood training. In many states one kindergarten course and student teaching is all that is necessary for kindergarten endorsement. Children themselves are supposed to be more sophisticated having learned many skills from watching Sesame Street or participating in preschool programs. Administrators, most of whom have no training in early childhood education, often see kindergarten as just a downward extension of first grade. They have no idea what developmentally appropriate practices are and pressure teachers to have product-oriented instruction that is quantifiable and meets their need (not the children's needs) for accountability. Blaming, of course, does nothing to help the problem. The truth is that in many kindergarten classrooms children are being taught a curriculum that could be taught more effectively in first or second grade. Many teachers are

using whole group, narrow-skills instruction which does little to promote learning in all but the oldest and most able children.

When Egerton (1987) wrote about recapturing the kindergarten for five-year-olds she decried the replacement of open-ended materials such as blocks, clay, paint, and dramatic play props with workbooks, worksheets, and didactic tasks. She said that teachers spend their time teaching discrete skills that are irrelevant to the child's life and are inherently boring. While she did not advocate going back to the past, she did clearly delineate the problem and call for changes in the kindergarten that give children a curriculum that meets children's needs for a richer, more varied environment, that talked about global concepts, and that used a language experience approach to teaching reading.

There does seem to be a growing recognition of the problem and organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education have been focusing on ways to make the kindergarten a more accepting environment for all five-year-olds. The NAEYC (1986) adopted position papers outlining developmentally-appropriate practices. The NAEYC (1988) has also published guidelines for the testing of children three- to eight-years-old.

The Report of the School Readiness Task Force to the California State Department of Education (Howes, 1987) recommended that readiness testing be discontinued and that all districts immediately examine the kindergarten curriculum to make it more integrated, experiential, and developmentally appropriate. The task force also

recommended that California make programs available from age three years, nine months for all children and that these programs have smaller classes taught by trained early childhood teachers who were appropriately remunerated. They wanted parents involved and they wanted articulation with prior and subsequent schooling.

The Nebraska State Board of Education adopted a position paper in 1984 calling for changes at all levels in practices that affect how the kindergarten curriculum is presented. Minnesota Early Childhood Teacher Educators with the support of the State Department of Education published a guidebook of kindergarten curriculum and methods (1986) which, if followed, would offer children a more flexible and exciting program than what is currently available to them. Other states are also reexamining the curriculum and practices in their kindergartens.

Summary

The trend toward having a fourth to a third of all children spend two years in kindergarten is alarming and disturbing. Setting up barriers to access into the first formal school experiences for an increasing number of young children does not benefit the children excluded or retained. The academically-oriented kindergarten is structured only for the oldest and most able group. The curriculum and entrance policies must be changed so that kindergarten can become an environment that accepts all five-year-olds and helps them to pass on to first grade. Schools must accept diversity in all spheres of development-cognitive, social, and physical-and employ well-trained teachers who use appropriate strategies to help all children succeed in the early years of elementary school.

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